

A groom's life – part two

Alison Malatestinic – groom for Canadian Dressage champion David Marcus

by **Mary McIntosh**

Canadian Olympian David Marcus is a top contender in international dressage competitions in Canada, Europe, and the United States and operates a full-service dressage training and sales facility in Campbellville, Ontario. In winter the barn moves to Wellington, Florida, where Marcus and his students compete in a highly-competitive international show circuit. His head groom and a key member of his team is Alison Malatestinic, who grew up in Rothesay, New Brunswick. Malatestinic, 41, has groomed for 15 years and has also groomed for Michael Matz, an American Olympian, and American showjumper Meagan Johnstone. She now manages three grooms and cares for Chevri's Capital, Don Kontes, and

Beyoncé, all of which are owned by Marcus's sponsor, Deborah Kinzinger.

What's a typical day like for you?

Well, it's definitely not a 9-to-5 job because you have to stay until it's done. We start the day at about 6:30 am when we're not showing, and we try to finish at 5 or 5:30 pm, but it depends on when the horses are ridden. We all have our specific tasks: someone gets the hay ready, someone soaks the grain, someone does the Gastroguard and then we start the chores for the day. We walk the horses at least twice a day, we tack them up and bathe them, we wrap their legs, and some get turned out, some don't. We also get the stalls mucked, we clean tack

and blankets, and organize appointments with the vet if they need vaccinations or papers for travel, and manage their worming schedule.

What are some of the main concerns of a professional groom?

A lot of people think that grooming means brushing and grooming the horse, so I really think there should be a different word for this job. For most grooms that's probably only about 10 percent of the day, although obviously you do have to brush them, but with all the other stuff you have to do throughout the day, or think about, it's the most basic, easiest part.

Nutrition is important and it is very specific to each horse because each horse has a different body type, and different energy level, and tolerance to sugar or carbohydrates, so it's the groom's job, depending on how involved they are allowed to be, to recognize the differences between the horses and adjust or change the horse's diet if they have that level of trust with the rider. It's really the same as with people; some people have a different body type, and if you think about it that way it's very easy.

The feet are also very important, and it's probably one of the most important things. Our horses are done every four to five weeks, and there are different oils and paints to put on them, depending on the feet. Some horses have hard feet, and some horses have soft feet, and some are shelly. It's like a person's fingernails, and hopefully with better nutrition the quality of their feet is a little better. They may also have a different shape of foot which will make them prone to different things, so a lot of the care is making sure their feet don't crack, and making sure they are on a regular shoeing schedule, and working with the farriers. This is especially important at the upper levels, with the intensity of work, and the travel and the competitions. It's also important to check the legs and monitor if they need



Alison Malatestinic with David Marcus and his Olympic mount Chevri's Capital. (Mary McIntosh photo)

ice or have an old injury, and to be kind of sharp on that.

Chevri's Capital is a black horse – does that make keeping him tidy more challenging?

Capi (Chevri's Capital) sweats a lot so he gets hosed off every day and his legs get washed with Silver Shampoo every day, especially down in Florida because of all the bacteria, and his tail gets washed two or three times a week with something like Tresemme or Pantene, and we use Cowboy Magic Detangler and Shine. Then he gets groomed just like the other horses – he gets curried, he gets brushed, and you go over him with a damp towel before he goes into the ring so it gets the last bit of dust off.

Is this a high-stress job, being a groom for an Olympian?

We have a great team with David, and our vet, and our farrier, and everybody consults each other, and that's very important, so that if something goes wrong, it's not just one person who is handling the situation. David is very hands-on, in a good way, so he's very involved, and we have a routine, but having said that, with Cap (Chevri's Capital), as far as worrying, I worry about him because if there's a one percent chance that there's going to be a problem, it's going to happen with him, but that's not typical.

What's the best part of your job?

It's the horses – you get to know them, and they sort of feel like your horse. I've also been very lucky because I've always worked for great people – they've always cared about their horses – and they've always been good to their horses. They have always been their number-one priority. If they're sick or if they're hurt, whatever they need, they get, it's not a case of passing over problems, nothing like that, and they've always been very thoughtful of their staff. You have a relationship with them, and they always thank you. You can disagree sometimes,

but you have to have a good relationship with the rider because you spend the most time with them than with anyone.

What's the hardest part of the job?

Well, it's changed since I've gotten older. Now I think it's the travel because we do a lot of shows in New York, different shows around Ontario, and sometimes in Germany, and at first it's fun because you get to see all these different places and meet different people but then you get your family of friends. That's what's nice about Florida actually, because everybody comes to one place and you kind of have a little bit of normalcy in that everyone is there.

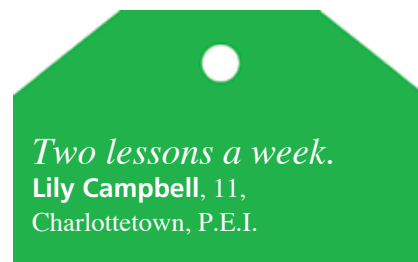
Is it possible to have a personal life with the hours and the travel?

Yeah, you do, but you sometimes have to force yourself because it can be tiring, but everyone is kind of in the same

situation, so that kind of helps. A couple of us play tennis, and I used to go to the gym regularly. I haven't recently, but I'll go back to it.

It sounds like grooming is a passion for most grooms.

Yes, I think so. All of my friends are incredibly intelligent – they could be doing other things, and we've all gone to university, so it's a choice for most people. Maybe we've gotten away from it (grooming) for maybe a season, or half a season, because we've been lured away by a five-day-a-week job, but we all just keep coming back to it because we love the horses and we love the work.



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